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Brennan is Wrong on Batarfi

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Jake Tapper of ABC News has obtained a copy of a letter John Brennan, the assistant to President Obama for homeland security and counterterrorism, sent to congressional leaders Monday night. Brennan defends the administration's efforts to close Guantanamo in the letter. While conceding that the number of former detainees who are "confirmed" or "suspected" of returning to terrorism has risen to 20 percent, Brennan says that all of the recidivists were released during the Bush years. Brennan goes on to argue that the Obama administration has made "significant improvements to the detainee review process," implying that it is being more careful in determining which detainees can be transferred or released than its predecessor.

In the middle of his letter, Brennan inserts this curious paragraph:

During the briefing on January 13, Representative Wolf made allegations that one detainee repatriated to Yemen had been involved in weapons of mass destruction. As it has done in every case, the task force thoroughly reviewed all information available to the government about this individual and concluded that there is no basis for the assertions Representative Wolf made during this session. I am attaching a classified addendum to this letter that addresses these concerns directly.

Brennan is referring to a Yemeni named Ayman Batarfi, who the administration repatriated to Yemen in December of last year. (I've written about Batarfi previously. See, for example, [here](#) and [here](#).)

Brennan's characterization of Batarfi is surely wrong. Congressman Wolf got it right. And you don't need classified information to see that Wolf has the better of the argument.

The key is Batarfi's involvement in al Qaeda's efforts to develop anthrax. Intelligence authorities at Guantanamo consistently and repeatedly found that Batarfi played a role in al Qaeda's anthrax program while working for al Wafa – a "charity" that is really a front for al Qaeda. (Al Wafa has been designated an al Qaeda entity by both the U.S. and the UN.) During a hearing at Gitmo, Batarfi conceded he worked for al Wafa.

An October 31, 2005 memo prepared for Batarfi's first administrative review board (ARB) hearing at Gitmo says Batarfi "met a Malaysian microbiologist in Kandahar at the Haji Habbash guesthouse" in mid-August 2001. "The microbiologist wanted to equip a lab and train the Afghans to test blood." The authors of the memo added: "The same microbiologist was involved in developing anthrax for al Qaeda."

A November 28, 2006 memo contains the same allegations.

So does a December 28, 2007 memo, which adds (see the bottom of the page [here](#) and the top of the page [here](#)) that Batarfi "told another al Wafa employee to purchase four to five thousand United States Dollars worth of medical equipment for that individual" – that is, "the microbiologist who was involved in developing anthrax for al Qaeda."

The same December 28, 2007 memo also includes this sentence, in reference to Batarfi:

"The detainee was identified as being a past participant in Al Qaeda's anthrax program and as having ties to al Qaeda."

Thus, on one hand, we have John Brennan's claim that "there is no basis for the assertions" that Congressman Wolf made about Batarfi's involvement in al Qaeda's WMD efforts and, on the other hand, we have the three memos written by authorities at Guantanamo over the span of more than two years.

Each of those three memos references Batarfi's involvement in al Qaeda's anthrax program.

There is more.

The U.S. government's unclassified files on Batarfi discuss his ties to a "Malaysian microbiologist" who was involved in trying to produce anthrax for al Qaeda. This individual is not named in the files, but is most likely al Qaeda's anthrax scientist, Yazid Sufaat.

Sufaat's background makes it clear why Gitmo officials were so troubled by Batarfi's ties to him.

Sufaat hosted two 9/11 hijackers at an apartment in Malaysia during the week they attended a key terrorist meeting. Sufaat also played host to Zacarias Moussaoui, who was scheduled to take part in the 9/11 attacks or a similar follow-on plot prior to his arrest in August 2001.

Sufaat was recruited to run al Qaeda's anthrax program by a top al Qaeda operative named Hambali, who is currently a high-value detainee being held at Guantanamo. Hambali introduced Sufaat to al Qaeda's number two, Ayman al Zawahiri. Zawahiri wanted to jumpstart al Qaeda's program for developing anthrax and asked Hambali for assistance in finding a suitable scientist.

Sufaat fit the bill. In 1987, he graduated from California State University at Sacramento with a bachelor's degree in biological sciences and a minor in chemistry. In 2001, Sufaat put his degree to work for al Qaeda. The 9/11 Commission found that he spent "several months attempting to cultivate anthrax for al Qaeda in a laboratory he helped set up near the Kandahar airport," which was then a key facility controlled by Osama bin Laden.

Batarfi met Sufaat during this time period.

During one of Batarfi's ARB hearings, the following allegation was read aloud:

"In mid-August 2001, [Batarfi] met a Malaysian microbiologist in Kandahar at the Haji Habbash guesthouse. This microbiologist wanted to equip a lab and train the Afghans to test blood."

Batarfi did not deny the allegation, instead he offered this answer:

"He was a student, he was not a microbiologist. He wanted to complete his studies and he asked me [for help]. He was only here for four months and had wanted to learn from the people in the hospital how to used (sic) blood-testing equipment. He asked me if he could purchase this medical equipment from Pakistan because in Afghanistan there were not any facilities to purchase it. I told him we could purchase it through [the] al Wafa Office and donate it to the hospital instead of you getting the money from yourself."

One of the board members then asked, "What kind of medical equipment?" Batarfi responded:

"It was [a] centrifuge, anti placenta for blood groupings; it was [an] autoclave for blood spacement. It was very simple equipment. He said it was approximately \$5000."

Later, during that same ARB session, the following allegation was read:

"The Detainee told another al Wafa volunteer to purchase four to five thousand United States Dollars worth of medical equipment for the Malaysian microbiologist."

Again, Batarfi responded:

"...I told the Malaysian microbiologist, if you want to purchase the \$5000 worth of items for the lab it is better to purchase it through al Wafa and you give the money to Afghanistan to me and then send it to Pakistan because it is unsafe."

Note that Batarfi did not deny meeting with the "Malaysian microbiologist," who is most likely Sufaat, or that he authorized al Wafa's purchase of lab equipment for him. Instead, he claimed that the microbiologist was only a "student" who "wanted to complete his studies." Moreover, Batarfi said the equipment was for supposedly innocuous blood-testing.

But Sufaat was no student at the time. Sufaat had graduated from California State years earlier. And al Qaeda tasked Sufaat with finding a way to manufacture anthrax, which is not an assignment that would be given to a mere student. Batarfi's ties to Sufaat are particularly troubling because, after the September 11 attacks, U.S. authorities found that al

Qaeda's biological and chemical weapons programs were far more advanced than previously suspected. It is certainly plausible, if not likely given the allegations made against Batarfi while he was at Gitmo, that the equipment Batarfi agreed to purchase for Sufaat was part of this program -- possibly to test blood for anthrax infections.

Batarfi was aware of how serious the allegations concerning Sufaat were. During the same hearing, Batarfi protested:

"They put my case with the Malaysian guy because he was a microbiologist. But now I found they claim he was [in the] anthrax field. So I did not know anything about this charge. He was a student who did not complete his studies and he was in Afghanistan for only four months to work with the technicians about the lab test."

Thus, Batarfi's own testimony indicates he met with and approved the purchase of equipment for al Qaeda's anthrax scientist. Batarfi's denials were only tailored to convey his own supposed ignorance of what was really going on. But there is no reason we should take Batarfi's excuses at face value. Batarfi's denials are tissue-thin.

Indeed, Batarfi made a number of similar admissions in the context of hollow denials during his hearings at Gitmo. Batarfi admitted he purchased cyanide, but claimed it was for dental fillings. He admitted he worked for al Wafa, but claimed the al Qaeda-designated charity wasn't really an al Qaeda front. Batarfi admitted that he met with bin Laden in the Tora Bora Mountains in November 2001. But, Batarfi claimed, he sent a letter to someone (he does not say to whom) asking to meet with the "head of the mountain" and, somewhat magically, just happened to get a face-to-face sit down with the world's most wanted terrorist -- at Tora Bora, in November of 2001 -- you know, when the whole world was looking for him. This was the second time Batarfi claims to have accidentally met bin Laden. The first time came at a funeral in Kabul when, again, bin Laden just happened upon the scene. Batarfi also admitted he stayed at various al Qaeda and Taliban guesthouses, but says he didn't realize they were facilities associated with Osama bin Laden at the time. Finally, Batarfi met the Taliban's health minister in 2001 because, well, that's just the sort of thing an al Wafa employee would do.

The bottom line is this: Congressman Wolf has good reasons to think Batarfi was involved in al Qaeda's anthrax program. Brennan says he has a classified assessment showing otherwise. The Obama administration should release it, so we can see how the detainee task force reached this conclusion. Did the task force take Batarfi's empty denials at face value?

In the meantime, there is plenty of evidence in the unclassified files, which are freely available online, showing that Brennan is wrong.

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